

Learn more about the chaplain

At age 16, one of Chaplain Pieczara's teachers tried to get children to become members of the Socialist Youth Party. The chaplain refused, and the teacher ensured him he wouldn't make it through his next year of school. Find out how he overcame the odds by reading the expanded version of this story at www.af.mil/stories/story.asp?storyID=123006023.

Chaplain recalls journey from communism

by Staff Sgt. Michelle Michaud

LAJES FIELD, Azores — Seven years after receiving his collar, the Communist Party came to haul him away. They would've arrested and interrogated him if he hadn't been so sick.

The Communist Party in Poland had heard enough about Father **Stanislaw Pieczara's** masses on Dec. 14, 1981. Just one day before, Soviet Union-based martial law locked the nation down.

Chaplain (Maj.) Stan Pieczara, one of three chaplains here, recalled his journey out of communism and into an Air Force uniform with vivid clarity.

He was so sick that the communists left him, thinking he would die. Two weeks later, three members of the party showed up again and took him to police headquarters.

In a period of just 16 days, his faith was tested. He'd nearly died of blood poisoning before, but the three men in long coats who stood before him now saw him as fit enough for interrogation.

"After four hours, they couldn't get anything out of me," he said.

He knew their tactics well. In his first years as a priest, party members followed him from place to place. He'd duck and bob in and out of places to evade them.

By October 1983, the chaplain said 30 years of communist rule was enough. He wanted to leave, so he talked with Catholic officials in England who helped him get his passport, taught him English and took him to the United Kingdom.

He served the church in Great Britain for nearly four years. He never considered American citizenship; however, his order asked him to move to Indiana in 1987. He fought going but eventually conceded.

After clearing up some passport problems, caused mostly by the Polish justice department, he found himself in Merrillville, Ind.

After a year, he celebrated mass in East Chicago, Ill., and eventually made his way to Phoenix, offering services for that community's more than 72,000 Polish-American citizens.



Nine years after his entrance into the lower seminary as a 16-year-old, the Catholic church ordained Chaplain (Maj.) Stan Pieczara a priest. When he couldn't join the diocese in Krakow, Poland, he joined his uncle's religious fraternity — the Society of the Divine Savior. As one of 790 priests belonging to the Salvatorians, Chaplain Pieczara took four vows: poverty, chastity, obedience and mission work.

Meanwhile, fulfillment of another goal was taking shape.

"I always wanted to be a military chaplain — even in Poland," he said. "I gave up that idea because I dreaded the thought that the communists would pay me."

But, the thought of serving the American military suited him fine; however in 1992 he wasn't an American citizen. A recruiting official told him he couldn't become a chaplain without citizenship.

In July 1992, he earned his U.S. citizenship. Within a month, he joined the chaplain corps.

With 11 years' service now, Chaplain Pieczara has deployed five times to places like Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Bosnia. He is one of 104 priests

serving more than 68,400 Catholics wearing blue. He has learned about diversity and working with other denominations to bring comfort to troops, he said.

He still feels the frustrations of other lay leaders. There are "difficult moments" that make him question his role in the chaplain corps, he said, but they're not nearly as difficult as arrest and interrogation. For that, he said he is thankful.

"There are moments, things that happen, that make me convinced that I should stay," he said. "When I see those moments, I see the reason why I'm here. That makes it very worthwhile."

— Tech. Sgt. Jason Tudor
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